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## NOTES ON CHAUCER'S ASTROLOGY.

## THE MAN OF LAWES TALE.

One of the most interesting of Chaucer's pilgrims is the Man of Lawe. He is evidently at the top of his profession: he knew every statute by heart, and as for the common law, he had at his fingers' ends every case and decision from the time of William the Conqueror. He tells his tale as if he were pleading before a jury, using every oratorical device, anticipating objections and answering them; quoting Scripture; at emotional points working on their feelings with bursts of horror or pity, praying, execrating, or breaking into passionate outcries.

He is also very learned in astrology; and one of the most interesting of Chaucer's astrological passages occurs in ll. 197-210. On this passage Prof. Skeat has supplied full notes. His explanation of ll. 197-202 is clear, but that of the following lines does not seem to me correct. The lines are—

. . . Cruel Mars hath slayn this mariage.  
 Infortunat ascendent tortuous,  
 Of which the lord is helples falle, alas!  
 Out of his angle in-to the derkest hous.  
 O Mars, O Atazir, as in this cas!  
 O feble Mone, unhappy been thy pas!  
 Thou knittest thee ther thou art not receyved,  
 Ther thou were weel, fro thennes artow weyved.

Now the ascendent was that region of the heavens which lay on the eastern horizon—namely, 5° above, and 25° below—at the time of the birth of Custance. The lord of the ascendent was that particular planet in whose zodiacal sign the cusp of the ascendent happened to be, and this planet was the ruler of Custance's destinies. Unhappily, at the time of her departure, this lord was "infortunat," having "fallen out of his angle," where he was potent, "into the derkest hous," where he was "helpless" to aid his ward. The Man of Lawe passionately reproaches her parents, who had not the prudence to consult their daughter's horoscope before fixing the time of her departure, which would have shown them her unprotected condition.

Prof. Skeat thinks that the ascendent was Aries, and Mars its lord, and that he had fallen

from Aries to Scorpio, which he takes to be his "darkest house," in which he was helpless.

But such an interpretation is full of difficulties. In the first place, Scorpio is not Mars' "darkest house," but one of his proper mansions, in which he is very powerful. His darkest house—*domus peregrina nocturna*—is in Taurus (cf. *Compl. Mars*, l. 58). To fall from the angle Aries into Scorpio, he would have to pass the angles Cancer and Libra and traverse more than half the zodiac, a journey that would take him more than a year. This, surely, cannot be Chaucer's meaning.

Again, Mars cannot be lord of the ascendent to Custance, and thus her celestial guardian. On the contrary, he is her most baleful enemy—her Atazir, or Evil Genius; and so far from being helpless, he is full of malignant power, and nearly destroys her.

I think all the conditions will be satisfied by assuming that the ascendent was Pisces. This is one of the most "tortuous" of the signs, and is the "exaltation" of Venus, who was lord of the ascendent. At the time of the princess' departure Venus had just left Libra, her "angle" and proper mansion, and fallen into Scorpio, her *domus peregrina nocturna* and darkest house, in which she was an alien and helpless, and could not protect her ward against the malignity of Mars. While Venus and Mars were usually on good terms, sometimes they were opposed (as in K. T. 1580), and hence Chaucer's phrase "as in this cas."

Prof. Skeat thinks that the Moon was in Scorpio also, as she had passed from a place where she was well, to one where she was ill; but this happens several times in each lunation. It is possible that the narrator had the sign Scorpio in mind when (l. 305) he compares the massacre of the Christians to the sting of a scorpion.

## THE KNIGHTES TALE.

Prof. Skeat has very clearly explained the planetary hours in this tale, but one point he seems to have overlooked. The situation is this: Palamon prays to Venus "in hire hour," two hours before sunrise of Monday, that he may wed the lady, and Venus grants his boon. Six hours later Arcite prays to Mars, in his hour, that he may win the victory, and Mars grants his boon.

Now, by a sort of Senatorial courtesy, no god could decently break another's promise, and Venus indignantly complains to Saturn, who promises to help her.

The combat takes place on Tuesday, Mars' own day, and Arcite is victorious. Venus cries with vexation; but Saturn bids her be quiet and watch what happens. Now there were three hours in Tuesday in which Saturn could act: the sixth, the thirteenth and the twentieth. The sixth was too early: it came at noon, when the combat was not yet decided; the thirteenth began at sunset. So Chaucer carefully notes the time: just before sunset—"er the sonne unto the reste wente"—Palamon is overcome and bound, Theseus stops the combat and proclaims Arcite victor, who rides triumphantly round the lists. The sun has set, and Saturn's hour has come. He sends a flash of fire from the earth, frightening Arcite's horse, who throws his rider, injuring him fatally.

#### COMPLEYNT OF MARS.

The curious astrological proem to this piece presents one difficulty. Venus and Mars have met by appointment in Taurus, her *domus propria nocturna*, but a place of danger to Mars (l. 58). On April 12, the Sun enters Taurus, and Venus flees into Gemini, Mercury's *domus propria diurna*, hence called "Cylenius tour." There, we are told—

"Cylenius, riding in his chevauche,  
Fro Venus valance mighte his paleys see."

What is "Venus valance," which is in all the MSS.? As Mercury is never more than about a sign distant from the Sun, Prof. Skeat infers that he was in Aries. But in no way can Aries be called Venus' valance (= *vaillance*, power, or place of power) as Aries is her *domus peregrina*, so he hesitatingly suggests a possible corruption from *faillance*. I suggest a mere change in punctuation, so as to read,

"Cylenius, riding in his chevauche  
Fro Venus valance, mighte his paleys see."

This expanded would be: "Mercury, coming in his swift course from Pisces, the 'exaltation' and place of power of Venus, enters Aries, whence he can see his own palace in Gemini, where Venus is."

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#### SOLOMON GESSNER AND ENGLISH LITERATURE.

BERTHA REED: *The Influence of Solomon<sup>1</sup> Gessner upon English Literature*. Reprinted from *German American Annals*, Vol. III, Philadelphia, 1905.

The author of this monograph begins the Introduction with a rather sophomoric statement. She says (p. 3), "Every true poet shows in his writings a love for child-life, animal life and inanimate nature, and a sympathy for creatures weaker than himself. . . . There is no better clue to the greatness of any poet than his manner of writing about children, his sympathy with inanimate nature and his fondness for animal life." Such a thesis as this will be very hard to prove and it is unfortunate that a work which has many good qualities should lay down this very questionable proposition at the outset.

The book is divided as follows: Introduction; Chapter I, English Criticism upon Gessner; Chapter II, Gessner and William Cowper; Chapter III, Gessner and Samuel Taylor Coleridge; Chapter IV, Gessner and William Wordsworth; Chapter V, Gessner and Lord Byron; finally Chapter VI, Conclusion.

The subject is one of great interest, so great in fact that the consideration of Gessner's effect upon his contemporaries is far more interesting than the study of the poet's own writings. His influence and popularity were very widespread. His works were translated into many of the European languages<sup>2</sup> and they enjoyed a success which at the present time seems entirely inconsistent with their merits.

Unquestionably, apart from Germany, Gessner's vogue in England was the greatest. Here he seemed to fit into the peculiar religious, social, and literary conditions in an extraordinary way. His relations with English life went beyond the limits of literature, although the present work

<sup>1</sup>The author sometimes uses the English spelling of Gessner's first name and sometimes the German.

<sup>2</sup>F. Baldensperger, *Gessner en France: Revue d'histoire lit. de la France*, 10, pp. 437-56.

O. Kyrre-Olsen, *S. Gessners Skrifter i Danmark og Norge*, Bergen.

Hilma Barelus, *Gessners Einfluss auf die schwedische Litteratur: Svenska Litteratursällskapets Tidskrift* 22, s. 1-16.